

“Clean Money” Plan Would Bring About Real Campaign Reform

by

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There is no more important issue facing us today than reforming the way in which candidates for public office raise and spend money. Most people would rank other concerns as more important to them personally. I, for one, am more passionate about providing affordable health care for everyone, giving our citizens a quality education, and protecting our environment. But I have reached the conclusion that campaign finance reform is paramount because it is the key to progress on all of the other causes I hold dear. Upon examination, most people will find the same is true in regard to their own concerns.

Take prescription drug costs –certainly a core issue to many Americans- as just one example of the many I could provide. Between 1991 and 1997, members of the pharmaceutical industry’s lobbying group spent \$18.6 million in political contributions. During this same period of time, the brand-name drug manufacturers successfully lobbied Congress to let them hold on to their patents longer. The artificial inflation in drug prices caused by the lack of generic drug availability costs consumers as much as \$550 million a year. Had the drug industry been prevented from making those massive donations, the prescription drug maker and the prescription drug consumer would have been on a level playing field in terms of influence. And the outcome of the industry’s lobbying efforts would have been much different.

Of the suggested solutions to this pervasive problem, the McCain-Feingold bill proposed in the U.S. Senate gets the most attention. If it doesn’t get watered down as its proponents compromise with the Bush Administration, McCain-Feingold is a good bill that would eliminate “soft money” among other campaign abuses. I am a cosponsor of its House companion, Shays-Meehan, and I intend to vote for it as I have in the past. But, while it’s a good first step, this approach won’t solve the whole problem.

If we’re serious about taking our democracy out of the hands of corporations and wealthy special interests and putting it back into the hands of the American people, then we’ll enact “Clean Money” campaign reform. The “Clean Money, Clean Elections” bill, which I have supported in the past and will be an original cosponsor of in the 107th Congress, would correct all of the problems addressed by McCain-Feingold. But it would also create a voluntary system of publicly financed campaigns for those who choose to forego most private donations.

Under such a system, office seekers could choose to run as “Clean Money” candidates and swear off private funds, except for a small amount of seed money and a set number of \$5 contributions that are used by the candidate to demonstrate grass roots support and qualify for Clean Money benefits. Once certified, the CM candidate receives public funding for the campaign and enjoys a significant allotment of free television and

radio time. A candidate who chooses instead to receive private donations receives no public funding and no free or discounted air time.

The public funding for the CM candidate would be limited to an amount lower than the national average for campaign expenditures by winning candidates. However, if a CM candidate's opponent chooses to accept private funds and spends an amount in excess of that limit, the CM candidate would be given additional funds to match the opponent up to a set level.

Above and beyond what McCain-Feingold would accomplish, the Clean Money plan would effectively limit campaign spending, allow individuals to run for office regardless of their economic status or access to large contributors, and eliminate the perceived and actual conflicts of interest caused by the direct financing of campaigns by private interests. It would give the ownership of our democracy back to the American people.